

The Mouth of The Kenai

JANUARY 21, 2016 · 12:26 AM

Photo editing as easy as 1, 2, 3

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter

What do you want to accomplish when you push the shutter button? That's a more fundamental question than how many megapixels your camera saves, regardless of the photos that you take.

Hundreds of billions of digital photos are taken each year, often uploaded to publicly visible social media sites. They're not all masterpieces — nor even necessarily in focus — but they're important to someone, whether as a personal or family memory, commercial or legal data, or as art. Whether you want your photos to stand out from the crowd or simply ensure that they meet your business and personal needs, it's worth taking a moment to consider what you want to do and how to reach that goal.

Family and travel photos are fairly straightforward. We want to preserve memories and share them with others. What we photograph is individually meaningful to each of us and beyond critique by others as long as they're of adequate technical quality.

Business and legal photographs require a bit more thought to ensure they meet your objective needs.

As examples, advertising and promotional photographs should show a product, location or some other aspect of your business in a positive and honest manner. Contractors need to document the extent and quality of their work, especially work that will soon be covered. Litigants need to document real property, damages, accident scenes and the like. Prior discussion with other involved persons, such as an engineer or other technical consultant or your attorney, is usually advisable in such matters.

In all of these practical situations, technically good image quality and accurate documentation is key. As long as the important facts are well documented, whether your photos show good composition or are "artistic" is irrelevant and perhaps even distracting. Hiring a professional photographer often makes the most sense in unrepeatable, important situations, like weddings and legal inspections.

Using photography for creative personal expression ("art") can be personally rewarding, though emotionally risky. It's not something you can farm out to anyone else. You've got to do "art" and other creative images correctly and personally or not at all. As a prerequisite, art photographs are expected to meet higher standards of technical image quality than day-to-day personal and business photographs.

Producing creative images that rise above mundane clichés is always difficult, but more so in an era when hundreds of billions of images are posted online every year. You'll need to take some risks that others will criticize or ignore images into which you've put your all. When people don't like what we choose to photograph and display, that can easily feel like an implicit rejection, not just of those images, but of you and your view of life, as well. That's quite a risk, emotionally, even though our intellect objectively reminds us that most photographs inherently only have meaning to the photographer.

How people view you and your creative photo work is dependent on what you choose to show them. All of us take many more photographs that we'll ever show to anyone else, often multiple shots and bracketed images of the same subject, usually taken as "insurance."

In the digital age, where it's easy and inexpensive to make images, it makes sense to take duplicative photos to ensure that we have a few technically good images that are in focus, do not show motion blurring and are properly exposed. Exposure bracketing, while useful in ensuring that at least one image is technically adequate, greatly increases the number of images that we need to review and either save or discard.

Discard photos that are less well focused and exposed, or that show excessive motion blurring. When deciding whether an image passes this basic test, it's important to determine how much you might crop an image and the maximum size of any print. Images you intend to make into large exhibition prints require significantly higher technical image quality than those used solely for online posting.

As an example, I'm doing a solo exhibit next month of very large images, printed 24-by-32 inches or larger. At that size, only the sharpest images with great depth of field are usable. Many photos I might have otherwise used had to be rejected due to camera shake, motion blurring, focus errors or too-limited depth of field. These errors cannot be fixed with post-processing and are the most common reasons that otherwise interesting images end up in the trash.

After eliminating obviously blurred or out-of-focus images, make a second pass to look for in-focus images with the best overall exposure. While careful post-processing in Lightroom, Photoshop and other programs can improve poorly exposed images, the technically best images are just right, right out of the camera, neither significantly underexposed nor overexposed.

Although RAW image files made with modern, large-sensor cameras are capable of preserving a lot of shadow detail, as well as some highlight detail, that should not lull you into careless exposure. Underexposed images tend to show more noise in darker areas, while overexposed images often produce featureless highlights lacking in detail. It's best to avoid either extreme.

On the second pass, eliminate images that, while sharp and unblurred, are less well exposed than other photos of the same subject. Ensuring one perfectly exposed image is the primary reason that experienced photographers bracket important shots.

On your third pass, choose the technically best image from each series of related shots.

As you make your initial examination of new photos, ask yourself — what was I trying to accomplish? Did I accomplish it adequately? And most challenging of all, was it worth doing? Use that knowledge and insight to better plan your next project.